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Police departments across the country are deploying officers dressed as construction workers or panhandlers as well as in buses to spy inside cars



[ ]To spot texting violators, authorities in Tennessee, a state with laws similar to Michigan's, use a large bus with police officers aboard. PHOTO: TENNESSEE HIGHWAY SAFETY OFFICE AND THE TENNESSEE HIGHWAY PATROL

*By*  
*Adrienne Roberts*  
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## 225 COMMENTS

SHELBY TOWNSHIP, Mich.—It used to be that when drivers saw a cop car nearby, their initial impulse was to slow down. Nowadays, people rush to hide their smartphones.

To curtail texting while driving, officers are getting creative in many parts of the country—with some even going undercover. Near Atlanta, for instance, officers dressed as construction workers operated a sting on cars driving by their site. Authorities in Albany, Ga., have gone as far as posing as panhandlers at street corners to spy inside cars for violators.

Distracted driving is blamed as a culprit behind rising U.S. traffic fatalities, but authorities have struggled to enact or enforce laws that effectively curb activities that take drivers' hands off the wheel. Proving a driver was texting while driving can be difficult and citations can be contested in court.

One example of an undercover effort is Operation Ghost rider, a Michigan program that since April has police using unmarked vehicles to stem dangerous driving behavior. Michigan is a state where holding a phone while driving is allowed but texting is illegal, and the accused often argue they were looking for directions, dialing a phone number or doing some other legal task when confronted.

On a recent stormy afternoon in Macomb County, Michigan State Police Lt. Mike Shaw sat in the passenger seat of a nondescript black GMC Yukon that traversed M-59, a busy highway spanning the northern Detroit suburbs. Lt. Shaw was watching for texting drivers; when one was spotted, he would radio ahead to a police car waiting to nab offenders. In the driver's seat was Jim Santilli, chief executive of the nonprofit Transportation Improvement Association, which teamed up with the Michigan state police on the operation.



[ ] Michigan is a state where holding a phone while driving is allowed but texting is illegal. PHOTO: CARLOS OSORIO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ghostrider efforts have been fruitful. Since the program's start, more than 140 drivers were pulled over and more than 100 citations were issued.

In two four-hour stretches, Shelby Township Police pulled over 93 drivers and all 93 stops resulted in a citation. If the driver was caught texting and driving, the ticket comes with a \$100 fine for first offenders and a \$200 fine for subsequent infractions.

"When we pull people over, we're trying to change driver behavior," Lt. Shaw said. Since Mr. Santilli also was observing the road, Lt. Shaw had an additional witness to any violations.

More than a dozen states—including California, Illinois and New York—prohibit using a hand-held device while driving for any reason. Like Michigan, most other states prohibit texting and driving, but texting at a stoplight, plugging in an address on a maps app while driving or dialing a number are all legal.

There were an estimated 40,200 motor-vehicle deaths last year in the U.S., a 6% surge from 2015 and a 14% increase from 2014, according to National Safety Council data. That is the sharpest two-year escalation in more than a half-century.

Nearly 3,500 people were killed and nearly 400,000 people were injured in accidents caused by distracted driving in 2015, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Auto makers have attempted to mitigate the problem by installing technology that allows drivers to use several smartphone features via Bluetooth connection and voice commands. About 95% of vehicles built for the 2016 model year had features enabling at least some form of hands-free phone use, according to data from [WardsAuto.com](http://WardsAuto.com), but drivers routinely complain about glitchy performance.

Alphabet Inc., Google's parent, and Apple Inc. —two tech giants supplying the operating systems on most smartphones bought in the U.S.—have introduced programs that allow drivers to plug their phone into the

car and operate functions on the dash. Many auto makers are offering the systems—dubbed Apple CarPlay and Android Auto— in new cars.

Lt. Shaw said the systems are better than texting by hand, “but anytime you take your mind off driving you’re still distracted.”

To spot texting violators, authorities in Tennessee, a state with laws similar to Michigan’s, use a large bus with police officers aboard. A bus has a high vantage point that helps police to better monitor what drivers are doing with their hands, Tennessee Highway Patrol Sgt. Travis Plotzer said.

Unlike in Michigan, Sgt. Plotzer notes the operation in Tennessee uses a bus that is actually marked as a police vehicle. But even that isn’t enough to get distracted motorists’ attention.

“You’ll still see people texting in their cars [continue] texting beside it even with all the bus’s markings,” he said.

In a two-hour operation one recent afternoon, police patrolling Knoxville issued 81 citations.

In Michigan, Lt. Shaw and Mr. Santilli saw several drivers start texting at a red light and then continue texting as the light turned green, driving through the intersection blindly.

One middle-age woman was spotted at a red light by Lt. Shaw with one hand texting on her phone and the other on the steering wheel. When the light turned green, she didn’t look up from her phone and drove through the intersection while texting. The motorist was pulled over.

“Everyone is doing it at all times of the day,” disputing the notion that only young people text and drive.

And drivers aren’t just texting while driving. In a period of about two hours, Mr. Santilli and Lt. Shaw saw drivers do their makeup, read a newspaper and smoke a cigarette in one hand while texting in the other. They also spotted a driver spreading cream cheese on a bagel with a knife.

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Sorry for any typos  
Sent from my iPhone